



Focus On

Hispanics

December 2007

Special Education and English Language Learners

Introduction: Current Situation Regarding Misconceptions Surrounding Language Differences vs. Learning Disabilities

"Children already come to us differentiated. It just makes sense to differentiate our instruction in response to them." (Tomlinson, 1999).

The 2002 census report reflects changes in the English Language Learner (ELL) student population. While the school age population increased by 12 percent, the ELL student population has grown by 54 percent since the 1990 census. Sixty percent of ELLs in the United States are Spanish speakers.

The fact that ELL students have continued to be heavily overrepresented in special education programs is testament to the need for a clearer understanding of the factors that educators must consider prior to referring an ELL student for special education services. (Case and Taylor, 2005).

What Does the Research Say?

"Culture influences the ways in which language proficiency develops and how language is used in communication and interaction." (Westby, 2005)

Research shows that 80 percent of the referrals to special education are generated from teachers' concerns over reading problems (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Previous research indicated an overrepresentation of English language learners in special education classes (Yates & Ortiz, 1998). However, current research suggests that educators appear to be doing a better job distinguishing a learning disability from language differences.

The Office of English Language Acquisition Study and the Office of Civil Rights Survey of 2002 put the estimate of all students referred to special education at 13.5 percent and the number of ELL students with disabilities at approximately 9.2 percent. The smaller proportions of ELLs may be explained thusly: (1) ELLs may be under-identified nationally as needing special education services; (2) ELLs in special education programs may not be identified as both ELLs and English Language Learners with Disabilities (ELL/Ds) in district records, but only as ELLs; and (3) There actually may be a lower disability rate among those identified as ELLs.

One Teacher's Frustration with the Special Education Process

A teacher is experiencing difficulty obtaining testing for a student who has been in the United States for approximately one year. He is struggling in every aspect, lacking basic English skills, lacking verbal communication skills in social and academic settings, lacking memory retention, lacking comprehension, and lacking motivation. The student is further described as being lethargic and almost comatose in the classroom.

From the very beginning, the teacher has been proactive in communicating with the parents and trying to become informed about the student's background, including the school previously attended, grades, and behavioral or medical issues. Unfortunately, family members have not been very helpful in providing this essential information. They obviously care very much for their child, but their response to the teacher's questions has been, "He was never any problem to the teacher."

During the first semester the teacher contacted the parents and consulted with other service providers such as special education teachers, counselors, the school psychologist, and the school nurse. In the second semester, a tutor worked with the student. In addition, the teacher worked with a special education teacher to modify the curriculum and lesson plans in order to improve the student's comprehension.

But now it is two years since the teacher first expressed concern about the student, and the student continues to struggle in school, and the student still has not been tested for learning disabilities. Needless to say, the teacher is very frustrated.

Translating Research into Tools and Best Practices

"As we gain a greater understanding of the human brain, we may discover that some students designated as 'learning disabled' may be merely 'schooling disabled.'" (Sousa, 2001).

Research based instructional best practices should be implemented in classrooms to support every students' learning styles, strengths, and individual needs.

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Tharp, Estrada, Dalton and Yamauchi, 2000, propose the Five Standards for Effective Pedagogy which delineate instructional activities that promote active student learning. These Standards are deemed critical for improving learning outcomes for all students, especially those of diverse ethnic, linguistic, or economic backgrounds. The Standards are:

- 1.) Teacher and Student Producing Together—joint productive activity among teacher and student
- 2.) Developing Language and Literacy Across the Curriculum
- 3.) Making Meaning; Connecting School to Students' Lives—put teaching and curriculum in context of students' home and community experiences
- 4.) Teaching Complex Thinking—challenge students
- 5.) Teaching Through Conversation—engage students through dialogue.

Research shows that use of the Standards by teachers was a reliable predictor of achievement gains in comprehension, language, reading, spelling, and vocabulary (Doherty, Hilberg, Pinal and Tharp, 2002).

Research also indicates that a child new to the English language may develop Basic Communication Skills (BICS) after one to two years, but it may take five to seven years to acquire Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).

Factors critical to the success of English language learners (Ortiz & Wilkinson, 1997) include:

- Early intervention
- Differentiated instruction
- Curriculum-based assessments to monitor student progress and data from assessments to plan and modify instruction
- Collaboration among special education and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) service providers, family, community members, and other stakeholders
- Response to Intervention.

Making the Intervention Process Work for an ELL Student

From an ELL specialist:

"It's November and a post-it is placed in my box in the staff lounge. A second grade teacher reports that Armando has made no gains and is falling behind significantly among his peers. Armando, like many of our students, was born in

the United States, speaks and hears only Spanish at home, and is very quiet in the classroom. As the ELL Specialist, I explain the intervention process to the teacher, review the forms and steps, and assist in completing the initial pages, such as the bilingual-history form. We meet with the literacy specialist, discuss the deficits, and isolate one language skill where we will intervene. Team collaboration is essential when going through the intervention process. Many times the team checks in with the teacher regarding the interventions and may support the teacher by assisting with the interventions (tutoring) or administering the assessments for progress monitoring. Weeks later, the paperwork is complete and the team meets to go over the student's progress. In this collaboration, the teacher is no longer the keeper of all of the information. The team comes together as a group of 'Armando Experts.'"

"In our schools, if a student qualifies for special services, the collaboration will continue. The language specialist continues to work with the resource teacher to ensure that language-acquisition strategies remain in place and the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is written with the language-learner's best interest in mind."

When Does an ELL Student Need Special Education Services?

When English language learners are not succeeding academically and a disability is suspected, it is critical that strategies are implemented, closely monitored, documented, and interpreted. How do you know when an English Language Learner may need special education services?

- The student's rate of progress is below the expected rate for LEP students.
- Prior to learning a new language, the student had a history of developmental or educational problems.
- The student's adaptive skills are significantly delayed.
- The student has difficulty responding to verbal cues.
- The student is not demonstrating mastery of materials at his/her language and developmental level, even after differentiating instruction.

Research shows that there is an overlap in the types of errors made by ELL students and students with learning disabilities (Kuder, 2003). However, normal syntactic errors for ELL students, in English, differ from the errors made by ELL/Language Disabled students in their native language.

Difference vs. Disability

English Language Learners Common Errors in English	Language Disabilities in Native Language
Words not structured correctly	Confused sequencing when relating an event
Words not verbalized correctly	Lack of interrelatedness of symbols or objects
Words with incorrect meaning	Poor organization or sentence structuring
Errors in use of plurals	Delayed responses or reactions
Incorrect word order-misplaced verbs or articles	Poor topic maintenance
Poor subject-verb agreement	Difficulty maintaining attention
Incorrect verb tense	Limited use of age appropriate vocabulary
Errors in use of "the, those, these, a" with nouns	Poor memory
Incorrect use or omission of prepositions	Confused placement of words or phrases
Omitting enunciation of "s" to indicate possession	

Adapted from Catherine Collier, *Difference vs. Disability*, 1998

Resources:

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NEA Resource:

Truth in Labeling: Disproportionality in Special Education. NEA Professional Library, 2007, www.nea.org/books.



Great Public Schools for Every Child



FactSheet

April 2007

Latino Students and U.S. High Schools

The United States Census Bureau projects that by the year 2050, about 50 percent of the U.S. population will be African-American, Hispanic, or Asian (U.S. Census Bureau 2004). These relatively youthful minority populations—Hispanics in particular—will drive future demographic growth and diversification well into the twenty-first century.

Nearly five million Latino students were enrolled in America's public schools in 1993–94. By the 2007–08 school year, that number will grow to about nine million (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education 2003). Over the past two decades, the percentage of Latino students in U.S. elementary and secondary schools has grown significantly, while the percentage of white students has declined and that of African-American students has held steady (NCES 2006).

This demographic reality makes it imperative to educate these students to high standards if the United States is to maintain its global preeminence. However, current statistics make it clear that there is a wide achievement and attainment gap that must be bridged before that goal is met.

Graduation, Dropouts, and Preparedness

The nation's high schools are failing many Latino youth. Latino high school students are notably falling behind their white counterparts in graduation rates, dropout rates, literacy rates, and college preparedness rates.

- In 2003, only 53 percent of all Hispanic students graduated from high school on time, compared to 78 percent of whites (Greene and Winters 2006).
- In 2003, the on-time graduation rate for Hispanic males was 49 percent nationally; for white males, it was 74 percent (Greene and Winters 2006).
- In 2000, 44 percent of Hispanic young adults born outside the United States dropped out of high school (ASPIRA 2004).
- Only 20 percent of Hispanic students leave high school prepared for college, compared to 40 percent of whites (Greene and Winters 2005).
- Of students entering college, only 7 percent were Hispanic, while 76 percent were white (Greene and Winters 2005).
- By the end of high school, Latino students have math and reading skills that are comparable to white middle school students (The Education Trust 2003).
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 86 percent of Hispanic eighth graders read below grade level, compared to 63 percent of white eighth graders (U.S. Department of Education, NAEP 2005).
- Seventy-one percent of eighth grade students who are English-language learners (ELL) test considerably below grade level in reading, compared with 25 percent of non-ELL students (U.S. Department of Education, NAEP 2005).
- Dropout rates for immigrant students vary widely by subgroup with educational differences influenced by country of origin, age at time of immigration to the United States, and whether ELL students are from first, second, or third generation immigrant families (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, and Clewell 2000).

Schools, Segregation, and Teacher Quality

A disproportionate number of failing schools, across grade levels, are predominantly comprised of poor, racial, and ethnic minority students. These segregated schools tend to have fewer financial, human, and material resources than schools in more affluent areas. By the time students who attend these schools reach high school, the academic challenges they face have been compounded by years of substandard education.

- Seventy-five percent of Latino students attend segregated schools in which minorities comprise 50 percent or more of the student population (Orfield and Yun 1999).
- Thirty-five percent of Latino students attend intensely segregated schools where minority students comprise at least 90 percent of the student population (Orfield and Yun 1999).
- One-ninth of Latino students attend schools where 99 to 100 percent of the student body is composed of minority students (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield 2003).
- Nine percent of white children are enrolled in minority-predominant school districts, in comparison with two-thirds of Latino children (Pew Hispanic Center 2002a).
- Latino youth are concentrated in central cities and thus are more likely to attend schools that are overcrowded and underfunded. In California, for example, about 16 percent of the teachers in schools attended by Hispanic students are not fully credentialed, which is twice the percentage for schools attended by white students (Pew Hispanic Center 2002b).
- In the last six years, there has been a 38 percent increase in the Latino student population, compared to a 13 percent increase in black public school enrollment and a decline of 1.2 percent in white public school enrollment during the same time period (Frankenberg, Lee, and Orfield 2003).
- Latinos and African Americans comprise 80 percent of the student population in extreme-poverty schools where 90 to 100 percent of the population is considered poor (Orfield and Lee 2005).
- Nationally, almost half of the ELL students attend schools where 30 percent or more of their fellow students are also ELL students (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, and Clewell 2000).
- Nationwide, 31 percent of ELL high school students had teachers who did not have a major, minor or certification in the field of bilingual education (Seastrom et al. 2002).

Special, Gifted, and College Preparatory Education

Statistics show that Latino students experience disparities in other important areas of education.

- Latino students identified as in need of special education are about twice as likely as white students to be removed from a general education setting and placed in a restrictive educational environment (Harvard Civil Rights Project 2002).
- Overall, 36 percent of Latino students classified as having learning disabilities spend the majority of their day in separate settings, such as restricted classrooms or schools, compared with only 20 percent of white students classified as having learning disabilities (Education Law Center 2004).
- At 34 percent, Hispanic twelfth graders had the highest percentage of long-term absenteeism (three days or more) of any other racial or ethnic group (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).
- Between 1984 and 2000, the number of Hispanics who took Advanced Placement (AP) exams increased dramatically, from 22 to 117 students per 1,000 twelfth graders, while the number of white students taking the exams increased from 49 to 183 per 1,000 twelfth graders during this same time period (NCES 2003; Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).
- From 1991 to 2001, the percent of Latino students who took the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) increased only slightly, from 7 percent to 9 percent (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).
- The proportion of U.S. college students who were Hispanic increased from 4 percent in 1980 to 10 percent in 2000 while the percentage of white college students declined from 81 percent in 1980 to 61 percent in 2000 (Hoffman, Llagas, and Snyder 2003).

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